

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

23 June 1985

Nation/world

U.S. shroud of secrecy bursting at seams

By George E. Curry

Chicago Tribune

WASHINGTON—In response to charges that a Navy espionage ring passed classified military documents to Soviet agents, federal officials have ordered an immediate reduction in the number of secret documents and the people with access to them.

But that might be easier said than done.

Two weeks ago, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger ordered a 10 percent reduction in the number of security clearances by next October and promised additional reductions later. He also appointed a special commission to review department security policies in light of the John Walker Jr. spy case.

Navy Secretary John Lehman ordered all of his commanders to reduce security clearances by 50 percent "as soon as feasible."

Despite such actions—and previous pledges by the Reagan administration to limit the unauthorized dissemination of classified national defense information—getting layers of a well-entrenched bureaucracy to change may prove more difficult than merely issuing administrative directives.

Part of the problem is sheer numbers. According to the General Accounting Office, an investigative arm of Congress, more than 50 government agencies are authorized to handle classified documents.

In 1984, those agencies produced more than 19.5 million documents, about 85 percent [16.6 million] for the Defense Department. [Figures for two top-level intelligence agencies, the CIA and the National Security Agency, were excluded.] The GAO reported that 14,000 private defense contractors had access to about 16 million classified documents.

Not only has the weight of the paper load increased significantly, so has the number of people with access to it. At the end of 1983 about 2.7 million government employees, including those in the military, had security clearances, a 7.5 percent increase over 1982.

Another 1.5 million workers in defense-related private industry held security clearances, bringing the total to 4.2 million.

And government regulations covering such things as what can be classified, storage of classified material and the types of telephones that must be used to discuss sensitive information "would literally reach from the floor to the ceiling of this hearing room," L. Britt Snider, a State Department counterintelligence official, told a House subcommittee on government operations.

Presidential executive orders have governed security clearances since 1940. Generally, presidents have designated the secretaries of the various military branches as "top secret" classifiers and permitted them to allow principal subordinates to determine what should be kept "secret" and "confidential," as well as decide who has a need to know such information.

Under President Reagan's executive order of April 2, 1982, "top secret" is information that could cause "exceptionally grave damage to the national security" if released. "Secret" covers information that could cause "serious damage to the national security" if made public.

And "confidential" information was defined as that which could cause "damage to the national security" if released.

The Department of Defense [DOD] uses more than a thousand guidelines and hundreds of directives and letters to assure that information is properly classified and stored. Despite such regulations, problems in the security-clearance system have been documented for years.

A 1979 GAO report, "Continuing Problem in DOD's Classification of National Security Information," concluded:

- Information not related to national security was classified.

- The same information was classified inconsistently.

- An examination of 556 documents from 23 Defense Department installations found that 24 percent had been improperly classified; 49 percent were either improperly classified, showed defi-

ciencies in the marking of classified information or had been classified without proper authority.

"The proliferation of classified information and the numbers of persons with clearances can have unhealthy effects and rather than improving security, can actually damage it as the whole classification process becomes cheapened," Rep. Glenn English [D., Okla.] said recently at a hearing on counterintelligence and national security information.

In a joint statement, Senators William Roth [R., Del.], chairman of the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, and Sam Nunn [D., Ga.], the committee's ranking minority member, said: "Far more workers have clearances than need them. For example, Pentagon officials testified at our hearings that 33 percent of the 'top secret' clearances among defense-contractor employees are held by people who never see a 'top secret' document."

Aside from the complications of the classification process itself, there also have been cases of carelessness.

In 1983, more than two dozen State Department documents, some of them marked "top secret" were found in a desk among surplus furniture that was donated to a prison in the District of Columbia.

Among the documents were the "Secretary's Morning Summary," which included information on fighting between Christian and Phalangist militias in Lebanon, Soviet missile deployment and reports on a Third World military coup in progress. The information had been received from CIA agents, embassies abroad and the military.

In some instances, mistakes have been repeated. For example, in 1978 the Department of Energy erroneously declassified a document concerning nuclear weapons. A copy of the document was found on the public shelves of the department's library at Los Alamos, N.M. The department subsequently conducted a sweeping review of newly reclassified documents and found about 2,000 on nuclear weaponry available, many of them clearly classified.

A year later, another classified

2

report on nuclear-weapon design was found on the library shelf. Yet another department check found 14 "classified" records still available to the public.

"Department officials agree that some of the erroneously declassified documents would help a nation develop nuclear weapons," a 1979 GAO report said.

"Because libraries and facilities that maintained these documents kept no record on their dissemination, we could not determine whether the documents in fact were ever used or sought by any parties other than the individual involved in the Los Alamos incidents," the report said.

Senators Roth and Nunn have proposed changes to tighten the security clearance process. Among their recommendations are:

- Programs to make certain that security personnel programs devote as much time to detecting potential risks as approving initial clearances.
- An executive order by the President requiring a 50 percent reduction in clearances within two years.
- Classification of information only when it is clearly necessary to protect national security.
- Determination by officials of the feasibility of using the latest technology for encoding classified documents to prevent unauthorized duplication.
- Economic incentives for defense contractors that voluntarily reduce their number of personnel with security clearances.